AUG 15 1987

466-A-3

ED 1.310/2:275077

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ED275077

RATIONALITY AND REALITY IN INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY OF DISTRICTS IN THE FAR WEST

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AERA
April 1985

EA 018 928

This research report was supported by a contract from the National Institute of Education, Department of Education, under Contract No. 400-83-0003. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the National Institute of Education or the Department of Education.

ORIGINAL

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 077 EA 018 928

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TITLE Rationality and Reality in Instructional Management: Results from a Survey of Districts in the Far West.
INSTITUTION Far West Lab. for Educational Research and Development, San Francisco, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 86
CONTRACT 400-83-0003
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Change Strategies; Curriculum Development; Educational Change; *Educational Practices; Educational Technology; Efficiency; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Instructional Development; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Instructional Improvement; Long Range Planning; *Management Systems; Models; Program Implementation; *School Districts; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

To discover whether school districts can develop highly rationalized forms of instructional management, this study gathered data from a telephone survey conducted in the school year 1983-84 of administrators in 30 western districts. The instructional management practices of these districts were then compared with an "ideal type" of rationalized instructional management system. Informants considered knowledgeable about districts' practices nominated districts engaged in "exemplary" practices and recommended other potential informants. Of the 39 districts in 3 states contacted, 2 or 3 administrators were interviewed for 1 hour each. Interviews centered around exemplary instructional management practices; respondents described the practice, discussed its relation to other practices, and reviewed implementation. Data analyses focused on practices in curriculum development, instructional assessment, and staff supervision and evaluation. Data analysis interpreted how a practice was coordinated with other practices. A rationalized model includes routinized instructional technology, a mechanistic control system, and a cult of efficiency. The study's conclusion is a qualified yes to the original research question. The qualifying factors are as follows: (1) due to resource constraints, rationalization of instructional management practices probably occurs in a fragmented way; (2) such fragmented change can evolve into an integrated system only after 15 to 20 years of practice; (3) implementation of rationalized reforms involves more than structural change. School culture must change from a logic of confidence toward a cult of efficiency to reduce teacher and administrator resistance. (CJH)

RATIONALITY AND REALITY IN INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY OF DISTRICTS IN THE FAR WEST

Is it possible for school districts to develop highly rationalized forms of instructional management? In this paper, data from a telephone survey of administrators in 39 school districts in the Far West are used to provide a partial answer to this question. An analysis is undertaken which compares the instructional management practices in the surveyed districts to an "ideal type" of highly rationalized instructional management system. The analysis indicates that districts in our survey contained isolated elements that approximated the type of rationalized management exemplified by our "ideal type," but that few districts managed to integrate these isolated elements into a highly rationalized system of instructional management.

Data and Method

In 1983, the Instructional Management Program at Far West Laboratory began a program of research and development on instructional management in school districts. A preliminary review of research on school district management (Rowan, 1983) led to the conclusion that more descriptive data on district-level instructional management practices was needed. Consultations with a panel of district superintendents confirmed this need and further suggested that educators would find such descriptive data useful. As a result, a telephone survey was designed to gather data on promising models of instructional management currently being implemented by school districts in the Far West region.

The telephone survey was conducted during the school year 1983-1984. Using "snowball" sampling techniques, research staff contacted informants known to be knowledgeable about instructional managment practices in school districts in the Far West region. The informants were asked to nominate school districts that were engaged in "exemplary" instructional management practices and to provide names of other potential informants. This sampling process concluded when new informants failed to generate new nominations. Using this process, 39 school districts in Northern California, Nevada, and Utah were included in the survey.

In each district, two or three administrators were interviewed for approximately one hour each. The interviews centered around the "exemplary" instructional management practice or practices that led to the district's nomination, and respondents were asked to describe the practice, discuss its relation to other instructional management practices in the district, and review the implementation history of the practice.

All telephone interviews were tape recorded, and research staff completed interview-summary forms using these recordings as reference. Initial data analyses focused on describing the varieties of instructional management practices in such domains as curriculum development, instructional assessment, staff development, and staff supervision and evaluation. In addition, attention was paid to the strategies used by districts to implement changes in instructional management and potential barriers to implementation. Finally, the data were analyzed to understand how a specific practice was coordinated with other instructional management practices within the district. An intial report on this analysis is Pathways to Excellence: What School Districts Are Doing to Improve Instruction (Rowan, Edelstein, and Leal, 1985).

Theoretical Perspective

At the time of the survey, the educational reform movement was beginning to coalesce in support of a highly rationalized form of instructional management. Advances in the field of measurement, for example, yielded new ideas about how to "align" curriculum and testing systems and how to develop management information systems that could accurately assess a school system's performance on instructional goals. At the same time, classroom researchers were beginning to reach consensus about effective teaching practices, especially teaching practices that appeared to result in increased student achievement on the kinds of basic skills measured by the new management information systems. Further, these new research findings had already allowed a burgeoning inservice market to develop for trainers who worked within this new "effective" teaching tradition. Finally, the effective schools movement was advocating a highly bureaucratized form of instructional management most suited to the management of organizations with routine technologies. This group of researchers and reformers especially advocated such practices as frequent monitoring of instructional outcomes, standardization of texts with a specific "alignment" to the types of skills embedded within district scope and sequence charts, and the close supervision of teaching.

It is easy to distill from these recent advances in educational research and development a highly rationalized model of instructional management. For example, an "ideal type" rationalized system would include the following:

1. Routinized instructional technology. Through curriculum development, instructional objectives are highly specified, and through district inservice programs, a model of effective teaching has been implemented. Hence, both instructional goals and instructional means have been clarified and the technology of schooling has been routinized.

2. Mechanistic control system. Output controls exist in the form of frequent monitoring by administrators of the results of criterion-referenced tests aligned to district developed

objectives. Moreover, tight behavior controls are exercised in the form of frequent clinical supervision of teaching to assure conformity to district developed theories of effective teaching. Finally, input controls in the form of standardized texts exist to assure that the content of lessons is "aligned" to the formal objectives of the district's curriculum.

3. Cult of efficiency. Through socialization efforts and through the imposition of sanctions for non-compliance with the district control system, district administrators and teachers have come to accept the legitimacy of both the routinized "core" technology and the bureaucratized instructional management system.

Results

The question for this study is the extent to which districts in our sample had implemented this type of highly rationalized instructional management system. Thus, we systematically compared the data on each school district's instructional management with the "ideal type" management system discussed above. Three central findings emerged:

1. Rationalized systems of instructional management like the "ideal type" discussed here are rare in the Far West. The major finding in support of this conclusion is that we received only 39 nominations of "exemplary" districts despite a sustained sampling effort. Moreover, of these 39 nominations, approximately two-thirds could be said to have been implementing a ively the types of rationalized management practices described above.

2. Among districts implementing rationalized instructional management practices, few districts were attempting to implement all aspects of the model simultaneously. Thus, few districts were engaged in systematic rationalization of instructional technology and management. Instead, most districts were involved in very "focused" attempts to rationalize one or more aspect of the ideal type described above.

Examples of focused implementation are frequent in the data. For example, several districts had developed new curricular objectives and matching CRTs, but these districts had not developed rationalized control systems that attempted to force teachers to teach to objectives or administrators to monitor results actively. In other districts, efforts had been made to implement a model of effective teaching through the provision of inservice courses to teachers, but the control system within the district allowed (even forced) administrators to supervise and evaluate teachers using criteria that were unrelated to the district's theory of effective teaching. In short, most of the districts we observed had fragmented control systems that operated on the basis of multiple and sometimes conflicting rationalities rather than an integrated control system of the sort exemplified by our ideal type.

3. There was substantial resistance on the part of teachers and administrators to the "cult of efficiency." In virtually every district, administrators reported that principals often resisted the imposition of rationalized control systems because such systems of control placed new and unfamiliar demands on them. At the same time, teacher resistence to such rationalized management systems as CRT-based management information systems or mandated district in-service programs on effective teaching was great.

Discussion

Organization theorists often compare organizational structures to ideal types in order to hypothesize about why organizations deviate from strict technical and administrative rationality. In the present case, I have examined school district management and concluded that when districts embark upon a course of action designed to achieve technical and administrative rationality, they do so in a limited and fragmented way and confront strong resistence from principals and teachers. The question of interest for those who would like to see school systems evolve the type of rationalized instructional management systems exemplified by our "ideal type," is this: Why is partial implementation of the ideal type described above occurring?

There appear to be several reasons why district efforts to rationalize instructional management practices are fragmented:

1. Districts appear able to implement change in only one dimension of an overall management system at a time due to resource shortages. A common complaint of interviewees in this study was that they lacked resources to pay for instructional improvements. As a result, most change initiatives were, per force, limited in scope.

2. To rationalize even a single dimension of instructional management can take from three to five years. This seems true of districts attempting to implement curriculum reforms, new in-service programs for teachers, district-level management information systems, or revised supervision and evaluation procedures.

3. When funding shortages are combined with the time requirements needed to implement a single dimension of management reform, it becomes evident that districts would need between 15 and 20 years to fully implement the type of idealized management system discussed above.

There are also several reasons why districts meet resistance when they attempt to institutionalize a "cult of efficiency":

1. Resistance by administrators seemed to result mainly because new forms of instructional management that were implemented required many "old school" administrators to adopt new management practices. Unfortunately, many older administrators appeared to have little interest in changing their managerial

ways. It should be noted, however, that such resistance was reacted to harshly by central district administrators. For example, mid-level managers (e.g., principals) were being subjected increasingly to supervision that monitored their compliance with district policies of rationalization and that there were real sanctions for non-compliance.

2. Teachers also often resisted rationalized instructional management reforms. This was especially true of reforms that threatened what Meyer and Rowan (1978) have called the logic of confidence in the technical core, such as the imposition of management information systems based on test scores or the evaluation of teaching based on district-developed theories of effective teaching. In the former case, especially, respondents spoke of teachers' "fear" of evaluation as a barrier to the implementation of rationalized reforms.

Central administrators' reactions to teacher resistance were different from reactions to resistance on the part of principals. Whereas respondents in our survey applied pressure to principals who resisted change, they were much less heavy-handed with teachers who resisted. In some districts, this was due to the power of teacher unions; but in other cases it seemed that respondents simply lacked the will or vision to overcome the strong logic of confidence that often dominates in instructional management.

Conclusion

I return to the question that was posed at the beginning of this paper: Is it possible for school districts to adopt highly rationalized systems of instructional management? The answer appears to be a highly qualified yes:

1. Due to severe resource constraints, the rationalization of instructional management practices in districts is likely to occur in a fragmented way.

2. Such fragmented change can evolve into an integrated system of instructional management only after 15-20 years of sustained activity.

3. The implementation of rationalized reforms involves more than structural change. A change in the dominant culture of schools away from a logic of confidence and towards a cult of efficiency will be required in order to reduce teacher and administrator resistance to rationalized reforms.